



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH, MENTAL RETARDATION AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES

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RECOGNIZING AND DEALING WITH REACTIONS TO SNIPER ATTACKS

VIRGINIA--The recent shootings in our area have caused many of us to have reactions similar to those experienced on 9/11 and the months that followed. These reactions include anxiety, fear, anger, and hyper vigilance. While these reactions are to be expected and normal, the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services offers the following information about typical reactions and ways to cope.

What are Typical Reactions to a Traumatic Event or Disaster?

All Ages

- Fears and anxieties
- Reluctance to leave home
- Hyper vigilance, excessive watchfulness, being on-guard for possible threats
- Irritability
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Anger
- Confusion
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in sleeping patterns; problems going to sleep, nightmares
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Alcohol and other drug use
- Sadness, crying
- Inability to concentrate

Children

- Crying, whimpering, screaming
- Fear of darkness, separation, being alone
- Excessive clinging, fear of strangers
- Worry, nightmares
- Regressing to bedwetting or thumb sucking
- Reluctance or refusal to go to school
- Increased shyness or aggressiveness
- Headaches, stomachaches, other pain

- more -

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What You Can Do To Help

When helping family, friends and co-workers, individuals often benefit from talking about the experience. Some helpful "Do's and Don'ts" for listening are:

Do say:

- These are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- It is understandable that you feel this way.
- It wasn't your fault; you did the best you could.
- Things may never be the same, but they will get better, and you will feel better.

Don't say:

- It could have been worse.
- It's best if you just stay busy.
- I know just how you feel.
- You need to get on with your life.

For children, reassurance is the key. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the situation honestly but don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, drawing, or painting but allow silences. Listen attentively to what children are saying and provide reassurance without minimizing their fears.

Additionally, try to maintain a normal household and encourage children to participate in recreational activity and limit viewing of news coverage and when you view news coverage do it together so you can answer questions and provide support. Adults should try to resume regular social and recreational activities when appropriate.

Finally, acknowledge that you may have reactions associated with the traumatic event, and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.

For help with reactions to the recent sniper attacks, call the Community Resilience Project of Northern Virginia toll free at 1-866-400-2951 (TTY: 703-228-4831) or visit www.communityresilience.com or www.dmhmrzas.state.va.us for information.

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Through a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services administers the Community Resilience Project of Northern Virginia with the Community Services Boards of the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, and Loudoun, and the city of Alexandria. The free services available through the Community Resilience Project include individual and group counseling, support groups, stress management, emergency preparedness, dealing with grief and loss, children and trauma, county services referrals, and financial or economic guidance. Services are also available to the hearing impaired. The services available through this project, established for those in the City of Alexandria and the counties of Arlington, Fairfax/Falls Church, and Loudoun who were directly and indirectly impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, are available for people in these areas who have been impacted by the sniper attacks.

